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SENATE

REPORT
No. 98–260

TRANSFER OF CIVIL METEOROLOGICAL SATELLITES

SEPTEMBER 30 (legislative day, SEPTEMBER 26), 1983.—Ordered to be printed

Mr. PACKWOOD, from the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, submitted the following

REPORT

together with

ADDITIONAL VIEWS

[To accompany S. Con. Res. 67]

The Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, to which was referred the concurrent resolution (S. Con. Res. 67) expressing the sense of the Congress that it is not appropriate at this time to transfer ownership or management of any civil meteorological satellite system and associated ground system equipment to the private sector, having considered the same, reports favorably thereon without amendment and recommends that the concurrent resolution do pass.

PURPOSE OF THE MEASURE

The primary objective of this resolution is to curtail present efforts by the administration to sell the Government's civil meteorological satellite (Metsat) systems by sending a definite signal that the Congress does not believe such a transfer is timely.

BACKGROUND AND NEED

On March 8, 1983, President Reagan announced his decision to seek commercialization of the Government's civil Metsat and land remote sensing satellite (Landsat) systems. The Congress subsequently passed provisions which prohibited such a transfer from occurring without prior congressional approval. The chairmen and ranking members of both the full committee and the Science, Technology, and Space Subcommittee asked the Secretary of Commerce in a March 13, 1983, letter to consult the committee at every step of the commercialization effort.

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Having followed the process closely, the committee feels that the difficulties outlined in the resolution have not been resolved by explanations of the proposal, and no compelling case for a Metsat transfer has been presented.

Senator Gorton wrote to Secretary Baldridge on July 11, 1983, to communicate his own feeling that the inclusion of the weather satellites in the administration's proposal is questionable. Senator Hollings, the ranking minority member of the committee, has also taken the position that "the sale of weather satellites does not make sense." (Congressional Record; Sept. 20, 1983; S12541.) Since the President's announcement, widespread attention has been paid to the Metsat issue by the media, the public, and the Congress. Much less attention and energy has been devoted to consideration of the future of the Landsat program. The committee feels that our Nation's land remote sensing capability is threatened by continued delay of a decision on Landsat's future, and this decision will be delayed as long as the weather satellite transfer is under consideration.

Legislative history

The committee included in both its National Aeronautics and Space Administration [NASA] (S. 1096) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (S. 1097) authorization bills provisions which prohibit the Secretary of Commerce from transferring the satellite systems without prior congressional approval. Both bills passed the Senate, and the NASA authorization bill was signed into law (Public Law 98–52) on July 15, 1983. The Senate also added an amendment proposed by Senator Huddleston to a House jobs bill (H.R. 1718) barring the Secretary from finalizing any satellite transfer without enabling legislation.

On August 22, 1983, the committee held a hearing on weather satellites and services in Seattle, Wash., which was chaired by Senator Gorton. Comments on the proposed satellite sale and other changes to Government weather services were solicited from National Weather Service employees and representatives of the marine, aviation, agriculture, and forestry communities, which depend on timely, accurate weather information. The testimony received by the committee revealed a general opposition to these changes. Senator Gorton introduced Senate Concurrent Resolution 67 on September 19, 1983. Original cosponsors were Senators Pressler, Trible, Danforth, Sarbanes, Huddleston, Abdnor, Eagleton, Stennis, and Warner. The resolution was designed to show definite opposition to the Metsat transfer, as opposed to previously enacted legislation which merely served to insure congressional involvement in the decision process. On September 20, 1983, the full committee ordered the resolution reported without amendment by unanimous consent.

SECTION-BY-SECTION ANALYSIS

The resolution expresses the sense of the Senate that it is not appropriate at this time to transfer Metsat ownership or management to the private sector.

ADDITIONAL VIEWS OF MR. PRESSLER

I add my strong support for this measure. The proposed commercialization of our civil remote sensing satellite systems has been a great concern of mine for a number of years.

When I introduced legislation last February concerning this issue, I expressed grave concerns that the transfer would result in a government-subsidized monopoly benefiting a huge corporation at the expense of American taxpayers. Among my other concerns then included the possible reduction in weather information and services now available to the American public, the scientific research community, and others. My concerns in these areas remain. Indeed, after further research—after more studies, more arguments, and more debate—I am now completely convinced that a transfer of our civil remote sensing satellites is inappropriate at this time.

This is especially true in the case of our weather satellite system. The inherent public service functions of weather satellites, combined with longstanding international agreements and lack of a private sector market, make it extremely difficult to justify transferring them to private interests now or in the foreseeable future.

The other portion of our civil remote sensing satellite program—the Landsat system—presents a whole new set of problems that we must address very soon. The "commercialization" proposal seems to have muddied the waters for future development of our land satellites. The sooner we can resolve the commercialization question, the sooner the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee can begin to focus on the urgent and timely problems now facing our Landsat program.

It is healthy for the Government from time to time to stand back and assess its role in supplying goods and services as a matter of public policy. I applaud the administration's efforts in this area. Whenever private enterprise can responsibly and effectively assume control of Government operations, a transfer should be made. But the evidence against the case for commercialization of these satellites is so overwhelming as to justify ending this review now.

By not doing so, we are simply prolonging the agony and unnecessarily causing great anxiety to those employees, users, and the general public who rely on our weather satellite system—in addition to jeopardizing our Landsat program.

I urge my fellow colleagues to join me in support of this resolution, and to act as swiftly as possible so we can address the concerns and anxieties of the American people, and get on with the other important business at hand.

LARRY PRESSLER.

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